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## Art and Androgyny: The Aerialist

### Abstract

Among the many circus performers who have fascinated writers and artists since Romanticism, the clown and the aerialist predominate. In the nineteenth century, the tightrope artiste inspired comparisons with the (self-styled) equally daring and equally craftsmanlike poet. The vertical metaphor suggested a vision of transcendent art that Romantics and their heirs claimed for themselves. In the twentieth century, vestiges of the same identification and transcendence remain, but a new sexual focus appears also. Two important texts by Cocteau and Thomas Mann, "Le Numero de Barbette" (1926) and Chapter 1 in Book III of *Felix Krull* (1951), show the aerial artiste as sexually ambivalent. An intertextual discussion of these two works highlights unnoted similarities in the seemingly opposed aesthetics of the two writers.

### Keywords

circus performers, artists, art, Romanticism, clown, aerialist, predominate, nineteenth century, tightrope, tightrope artiste, poet, vertical metaphor, metaphor, transcendent art, Romantics, twentieth century, sexual, Cocteau, Thomas Mann, Le Numero de Barbette, Felix Krull, sexually ambivalent

## Art and Androgyny: the Aerialist

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Now that Boy George has adorned the cover of the sober *Harvard Magazine*, we may consider androgyny officially “in.” Of course his provocative portrait has aroused a storm of protest from older male readers; their outraged letters covered several pages. Despite such antipathy, however, not even the most insecure man doubts that transsexual modes represent a significant symptom of our current confusion about sexual identity. Scholars of contemporary fashion, like Anne Hollander, have long recognized the inevitable feminization of clothes. Similarly, the (relative) liberation of women has encouraged them to mimic at least the appearance of the traditionally successful male.

Here I wish to discuss some linked pieces in the complex mosaic of this trend in literature and the arts. My focus rests on a figure particularly compelling to writers and artists of the early twentieth century: the aerialist. Among the many circus performers who have fascinated artists since Romanticism, the clown and the acrobat predominate.<sup>1</sup> Like the Romantics, we may see in the tightrope-artist the “serious” side of the show: grace, skill, agility, even the daring conquest of human limits. Conversely, the clown demonstrates the utter reversal of such values: clumsiness, stupidity, an all-too-human image of our own inadequacy. Here I will pursue one aspect of the aerial artist-figure, its perceived sexual ambiguity. Two major European writers, Jean Cocteau and Thomas Mann, develop opposing aesthetics from their remarkably comparable views of such androgyny. To my knowledge, no one has yet attempted this comparison. So I must state clearly that I do not imply a general link between these two writers or their work. Indeed, despite their mutual admiration, the two make a decidedly odd couple.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, I focus only on the potent thematic cluster—aerial acrobatics as an androgynous fantasy—that their two texts illumine.

I. BACKGROUND

To begin with, we need some grasp of the aerial image in the nineteenth century. Banville set the pattern for what I call "the vertical metaphor." He and other writers—Gautier, Barbey d'Aurevilly—saw in trapeze acts a parallel for the daring ambition and the formal skill of the artist. In the last of his *Odes Funambulesques* of 1857, Banville makes his *sauteur*, gone mad with the joy of his act, transcend the circus itself.

. . . Plus loin! Plus haut! je vois encor  
les boursiers à lunettes d'or,  
des critiques, des demoiselles  
et des réalistes en feu.  
Plus haut! Plus loin! de l'air! du bleu!  
Des ailes! des ailes! des ailes!

Enfin, de son vil échafaud,  
Le clown sauta si haut, si haut,  
Qu'il creva le plafond de toiles  
Au son du cor et du tambour,  
Et, le coeur dévoré d'amour,  
Alla rouler dans les étoiles. (Banville 290)

Further! Higher! I can still see/ The brokers with  
their opera glasses,/ The critics, the young girls,/  
And the avid realists./ Higher! Further! Air! Sky!/  
Wings! Wings! Wings!  
Finally, the clown/ Sprang so high, so high,/ That he  
burst the canvas ceiling/ To the thunder of horns and  
drums,/ And, his heart devoured by love,/ He went  
rolling among the stars.

The aspirations of this acrobat spring from social protest, for he soars into the sky in order to escape the petit-bourgeois audience. Thus the vaulter attains a blazing immortality; he becomes a member of the galaxy. His act liberates the performer from all earthly bounds. Translated into metaphor, the artist escapes the petty human world through art.

Since Banville, writers have seen the flight of the artist both negatively, as a release from the miseries of earth, and positively, as a symbol of transcendence. The juxtaposition of these two ideas, escape and liberation, creates a major tension in *l'art pour l'art*. Art as flight-from-reality points toward the hermetic attitudes of Surrealism, Dada and the Absurdist movements. The other aspect of flight, the striving to surpass ordinary experience, culminates in Nietzsche's image of the *Übermensch*. In the language of Gaston Bachelard, Nietzsche epitomizes the "montagnard," the "imagination aërienne." Zarathustra sees in his aerialist, the rope-dancer of his Prologue, the potential for ultimate transcendence. Indeed the self-overcoming that he preaches goes so far beyond the present state of mankind that we must understand the *Übermensch* as an abstraction only.

The author of the nineteenth century was seeking a new identity suitable for the Industrial Age, the era of what Walter Benjamin calls "high capitalism." Without patrons, the artist became like any day laborer, selling his wares commercially. Hence the drive of the writer to elevate himself above the rest of society. Transcendence became a psychological need, which we note in many forms since Romanticism. Ascent characterizes the period, be it in the "arriviste" young men on the make in Balzac or the spirituality of heroes in Hugo. The *sauteur* of Banville has symbolic value, since he was the first to concretize the Romantic imagery of flight in the aerialist. One need only compare "Élévation" by Baudelaire and "L'Azur" by Mallarmé to sense the metaphoric power of this vaulter in Banville.<sup>3</sup>

After Nietzsche we understandably find few European writers obsessed with ascent. Whether or not we see him as the last bearer of Romantic idealism, we must note that his heirs have not even attempted his ambitious heights. In our century, transcendence yields to another Nietzschean trait: relativity. In the era that produced the Holocaust, writers could no longer believe in the ability of mankind to surpass its own present character. On the contrary, all idealism seems to have perished by 1914, the true end of the nineteenth century. Harry Levin charts this journey as moving "from the most heroic to the least heroic values, from the battlefield of Waterloo to the sick-room of Proust" (82). George Bernard Shaw put it similarly: "The first half of the nineteenth century thought itself the greatest of all centuries. The second half discovered it was the wickedest of all centuries" (Dickens 332).

In our time, the image of the acrobat continues to express the

superiority of the artist, who still sees himself as a daring young man on a flying trapeze. But this transcendence is undercut by irony and ambiguity, outgrowths of the relativity I have just noted. The uncertain identity of the artist still haunts our literature. In his recent Zuckerman trilogy, Philip Roth poses the same question that Joyce did: Who is the artist? For both the writers I treat here, the questionable nature of the artist assumes a sexual form that accords with the relative sexual liberation of their time: androgyny. Such ambivalence in their aerialists provides an apt metaphor for the mystery of the artist himself.<sup>4</sup>

The acrobats of both Cocteau and Mann hark back to a "classic" common ancestor, the acrobat Miss Urania in Huysmans' *A Rebours* of 1884. Des Esseintes imagines this woman as a male lover for himself.

En tête du défilé des maîtresses . . . était Miss Urania, une Américaine, au corps bien découpé, aux jambes nerveuses, aux muscles d'acier, aux bras de fonte . . . à mesure qu'il s'admirait sa souplesse et sa force, il voyait un artificiel changement de sexe se produire en elle; ses mièvreries de femelle s'effaçaient de plus en plus, tandis que se développaient, à leur place, les charmes agiles et puissants d'un mâle; en un mot, après avoir tout d'abord été femme, puis, après avoir hésité, après avoir avoisiné l'androgynie, elle semblait se résoudre, se préciser, devenir complètement un homme. . . . Des Esseintes . . . en vint éprouver de son côté, l'impression que lui-même se féminisait, et il envia décidément la possession de cette femme . . . il comformait ses rêves, en posant la série de ses propres pensées sur les lèvres inconscientes de la femme, en relisant ses intentions qu'il plaçait dans le sourire immuable et fixe de l'histrionne tournant sur son trapeze. (Huysmans 140-41)

Heading the procession of mistresses . . . was an American girl with a supple figure, sinewy legs, muscles of steel, and arms of iron. . . . The more he admired her suppleness and strength, the more he thought he saw an artificial change of sex operating in her; her mincing movements and feminine affectations became less obtrusive, while she developed in their place the charms of agility and vigor in a male. In a word, having been at first a woman, then, after hesitating, being something like an

androgynous, she now seemed to become decisively a man. . . . Des Esseintes came to think that, for his part, he was becoming feminine, and he was seized with the desire to possess this woman . . . he confirmed his fantasy by attributing the same inverted thoughts as his own to the unconscious mind of this woman, reading his own desires repeated in the fixed smile that hovered on the lips of the performer on her trapeze. (Baldick 110-11)

For both Cocteau and Mann, the aerialist arouses similar fantasies of sex change in the male spectator. But they both also go far beyond Huysmans in their use of this ambivalent figure as a symbol of their aesthetics. For them, the primary meaning of any circus act lies in its creating of illusion. Hence the acrobatics of either a man or a woman who appears to be of the opposite sex bears the double illusion of the spectacle itself and ambivalent sex also. And although their attitudes toward illusion differ sharply, both Cocteau and Mann see it as the basis of art.

## II. BALANCE

Before comparing our two texts, let us consider a painting that not only bridges the wide intellectual gap between Huysmans and Cocteau; it also introduces another determining element into the image of the androgynous acrobat. I refer to *L'Acrobate sur la balle* of 1905, one of Picasso's many works that celebrate the milieu of the saltimbanque. We note right away the contrast offered by the street show: the agile, sprite-like girl beside her colleague, the massive weight-lifter. Picasso imaged the male generally as square, and the female as round (Axson 221). The girl gives an essential image of precarious balance, precisely what any artist must achieve. That is, the saltimbanque offers an apt metaphor for the dual existence of the artist, who must entertain the same conventional society that treats him as an outsider. (Whoever doubts the survival of that "romantic" prejudice should talk to any actor who has recently tried in vain to buy a chic condominium in New York City).

The professional and personal lives of the artist must exist at odds with each other, and he must balance somehow between the two. Here lies one basic metaphor involved, not only in the saltimbanques of Picasso, but also in most literature of the entertainer since

Romanticism. As Politzer says, the circus is a *Zwischenreich*, a realm between. Accordingly, many artists have seen in this show their own duality. Picasso sharpens the ambivalence of his acrobat by making her adolescent. Her age itself suggests the bridging of two separate realms, that of the child and that of the adult. She barely balances on the orb, just as she executes that risky dance holding both the freedom of the child and the limitation of the adult. Furthermore, she embodies that moment of ambivalent sexuality when puberty begins. Again in contrast to the unquestionably male Hercules, she seems to hover between both sexes. Her body could well be that of a boy, while her face and hairdo are feminine. Reviewing this and similar canvases, Apollinaire said of such figures,

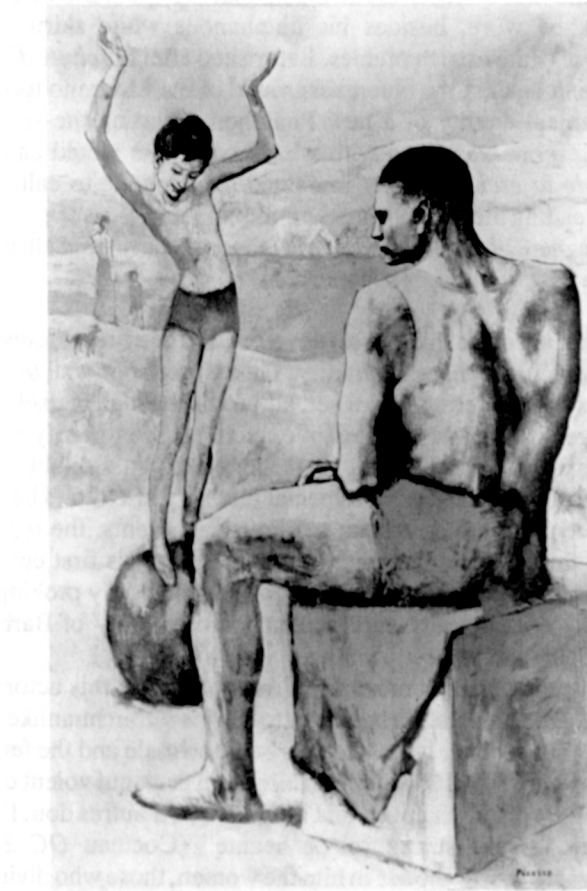
The adolescent sisters, treading and balancing themselves on the great balls of the saltimbanques, impart to those spheres the movements of the planets. These girlish adolescents, children still, have the anxieties of innocence; animals teach them the religious mysteries. Some harlequins accompany the aura of the women and resemble them, neither male nor female . . . placed at the outer limits of life, the animals are human and the sexes indistinct. (Apollinaire 16)

The background of this picture, that mysterious Symbolist Nowhere, also contains a distant image of motherhood that suggests the probable but hazy future of this girl. Indeed she balances between the background mother and the foreground male: a symbol of ambivalent sexuality.

### III. COCTEAU (1889–1963)

This idea of the paradoxical balance of the androgynous acrobat develops further in the work of Picasso's colleague, friend and would-be lover, Cocteau. His most famous androgynes appear in the films *Orphée* and *Le Sang d'un Poète*. There we see the actual transvestite who inspired the female figure of Death in *Orphée*, a man called Barbette. This Texan, Vander Clyde, performed a trapeze act in elaborate drag, which he finally removed in an artful strip-tease. In his essay of 1926, "Le Numéro Barbette," Cocteau describes the shock of the crowd when, after five encores, Barbette shows that he has created "an unforgettable lie": he removes his wig (262). These





Pablo Picasso, *L'Acrobate* (1905)

shows at the Cirque Médrano quickly became a sensation in the twenties, and the literati made Barbette their darling.

... there assembled at the ringside a *tout Paris* audience such as formerly gave color to the *Cigale* and chic to the Diaghilev ballet. For his triumphal entry (and certainly on the first white carpet and to the first *Schéhérazade* music that the Médrano had ever known), he wore, besides his diaphanous white skirts, fifty pounds of white ostrich plumes. Before and after his *chute d'ange* fall, which against the blue background of the Médrano took on the mythical quality of a new Phaethon deserting the sky, his dressing room was filled with what Lone Stars would call the *crème de la crème*. It only remained for Barbette to call forth from a leading literary journal the comparison, "He is apparently like Wagner, of whom it was said, he was only himself when dressed as a woman." (Flanner 73)

For Cocteau, one of his closest *dévotes*, Barbette represents just this blatant exhibit of male femininity. This artiste goes well beyond the marvel of his dangerous aerial act, admirable enough in itself. But the unique genius of Barbette lies in exploiting, even glorifying his split sexuality. So Cocteau finds in this man-woman a double alter ego. In fact, the personal tie bore special intensity in 1926. The poet had only recently recovered from two crushing events: the typhoid death of his first beloved, Raymond Radiguet, and his first cure for opium poisoning. At a time when Cocteau was painfully probing his own existence, the literally spectacular homosexuality of Barbette seemed like epiphany.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond such personal meaning, Cocteau finds in this actor two cherished aesthetic ideals. First, Barbette attains a craftsmanlike perfection in his art; second, he transcends both the male and the female in embodying pure sexual beauty: "... il plaît à ceux qui voient en lui la femme, à ceux qui devinent en lui l'homme, et à d'autres dont l'âme est émue par le sexe surnaturel de beauté" (Cocteau *OC* 261). (. . . he pleases those who see in him the woman, those who divine in him the man, and others whose soul is moved by the supernatural sex of beauty).<sup>6</sup>

Francis Steegmuller calls the essay of Cocteau "a classic in the literature of aesthetics" (368). Cocteau describes his artistic ideals through a journalistic account of the aerial act he sees. Watching

Barbette prepare backstage, he marvels at the three-hour ritual involving costume and make-up. In his scrupulous attention to this process, Barbette belongs to the tradition of the great clowns or the Cambodian dancers who are sewn into their costumes each night. Cocteau compares this moment to Greek fables, where young men become trees, flowers. Calling Barbette Apollo-like, he clearly heroizes the ability of the artiste to shed, like a god, his given gender. So even before the act begins, we grasp its essential meaning as transformation. Cocteau bears passionate witness to an event that literally changes the identity of the performer. Furthermore, we find here the dominant theme of the essay, artifice, that keystone of Cocteau's aesthetics that harks back to Baudelaire.<sup>7</sup>

In describing the genius of Barbette in capturing, even parodying the eternal feminine, Cocteau sums up this ideal of falseness.

... Car n'oubliez pas, nous sommes dans cette lumière magique du théâtre, dans cette boîte à malice où le vrai n'a plus cours, où le naturel n'a plus aucune valeur, où les petites tailles s'allongent, les hautes statures rapetissent, où des tours de cartes et de passe-passe dont le public ne soupçonne pas la difficulté, parviennent seuls à tenir le coup. Ici Barbette sera *la femme* comme Guitry était *le général russe*. Il me fera comprendre que les grands pays et les grandes civilisations ne confiaient pas seulement par décence les rôles de femmes à des hommes. Il nous rappellera François Fratellini m'expliquant, alors que je m'épuisais à ne pouvoir rien obtenir d'un clown anglais dans le rôle du bookmaker du "Boeuf sur le Toit," qu'un anglais ne pouvait pas faire l'Anglais! . . . Quel recul! quels efforts! quelles leçons de métier! A les entendre, . . . j'ai appris les secrets de la scène. (Cocteau OC 260)

... Don't forget, we are in the magic light of the theater, in that magic box where reality no longer exists, where the natural no longer counts, where small people grow large and tall ones diminish, where card tricks and sleight of hand, their difficulties unknown to the public, are the only things which succeed. Here Barbette will be as much *woman* as Guitry was *Russian general*. He will make me understand that great civilisations did not entrust women's roles to men simply because of decency. He will remind us of François Fratellini, who explained to me why I

could not get an English clown to play the bookmaker in *The Ox on the Roof*: an Englishman cannot play an Englishman! . . . What detachment! What concentration! What lessons in professionalism! By listening to such people . . . I learned the secrets of the stage. (Crosland 223)

Next comes an exemplary list of the lies of the theater, all of which express Cocteau's essential idea of art as illusion. Like these examples, Barbette offers the basic paradox of all art, which succeeds only by rendering a plural vision of many things that often contradict each other. Art, says Cocteau, resembles the self-transforming acrobat: both are ultimately indeterminate.

#### IV. MANN (1875-1955)

The opposite of Barbette—namely, a female aerialist suggesting maleness—also reveals the aesthetics of Mann. In the first chapter of Book III of *Die Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*, written in 1951, Felix delights in a Parisian circus, particularly its star acrobat, Andromache. Her name artfully combines classic heroism with the word *androgynous*. Krull begins his rhapsodic account of her death-defying act with a physical description that highlights her ambiguous sex.

. . . Sie war von etwas mehr als mittlerer Weibesgrösse. . . . Ihre Brust war geringfügig, ihr Becken schmal, die Muskulatur ihrer Arme, wie sich versteht, stärker ausgebildet als sonst bei Frauen, und ihre greifenden Hände zwar nicht von männlicher Grösse, aber doch auch nicht klein genug, um die Frage ganz auszuschalten, ob sie, in Gottes Namen, denn vielleicht heimlich ein Jüngling sei. . . . (Mann *GW* 7:458-59)

She was of more than average size for a woman. . . . Her breasts were meagre, her hips narrow, the muscles of her arms, naturally enough, more developed than in other women, and her amazing hands, though not as big as a man's, were nonetheless not so small as to rule out the question whether she might not, Heaven forfend, be a boy in disguise. (Lindley 157)

However, upon recognizing the essentially female shape of this figure,

Krull starts to muse on the precise nature of her sexuality. Perhaps the double message of this body reveals the demands of its craft. Acute physical exertion may preclude a normal sexual identity. Here we find that idea, characteristic of Mann, that the artist cannot partake of ordinary life. This sense that creativity alienates one from the rest of humanity forms a major tension for most of his artist figures. (It does not even exist for Cocteau, whose creative types would never dream of comparing themselves to businessmen).

. . . zu wohl erkannte man, daß dieser strenge Körper das, was andere der Liebe geben, an seine abenteuerliche Kunstleistung verausgabte. . . . Ein ernster Engel der Tollkühnheit war sie mit gelösten Lippen und gespannten Nüstern, eine unnahbare Amazone des Luftraumes unter dem Zeltdach, hoch über der Menge, der vor starrer Andacht die Begierde nach ihr verging. (460)

One recognized too well that this disciplined body lavished upon the adventurous accomplishments of her art what others devote to love. . . . A solemn angel of daring with parted lips and dilated nostrils, that is what she was, an unapproachable Amazon of the realms of space beyond the canvas, high above the crowd, whose lust for her was transformed into awe. (Lindley 158–59)

Specifically, Krull wonders whether Andromache might be the lover of Mustafa, the burly animal trainer. He, at least, would equal her in daring; they could be comrades in the face of death. But no, surrendering to love would dangerously weaken her. “Sie hätte fehlgegriffen, ich war dessen sicher, wenn sich der Kühnheitsengel zum Weibe erniedrigt hätte, und wäre schmäählich-tödlich zur Erde gestürzt . . .” (463). (She would have slipped, I was sure, if this angel of daring had debased herself as a mere woman, she would have fallen to a shameful death [Lindley 160–61]).

Andromache, then, is superhuman. She reminds us of Nietzsche’s rope-dancer, the would-be *Übermensch*, who falls only because *he* surrenders to the all-too-human weakness of uncertainty. This acrobat loses his balance when a jester taunts him. Nietzsche did not accidentally choose a rope-dancer to depict his morality of living dangerously. Similarly, the fatal risk flaunted by Barbette also magnetizes Cocteau, who constantly allegorizes Death. He calls the acrobat

"a strange coachman of death" (258). Krull further specifies the superhuman aura of Andromache by placing her atop his circus hierarchy. She stands closer to the angels than the beasts, those at the opposite end of the scale represented by this show.

The androgyny of Andromache relates her to many similar figures in both *Krull* and other works of Mann. Indeed the earnest tone Krull adopts to describe her, contrasting with his usual deadpan irony, shows that Andromache raises some serious concerns of the author. Considering her ambivalent sex in its broadest meaning as duality per se, we see that she reiterates that pervasive theme of Mann, the dual identity of the artist. Take only one comparable example from *Tonio Kröger*. In decrying his uncertainties to Lisaveta, Tonio says, "Ist der Künstler überhaupt ein Mann? Man frage das Weib danach! Mir scheint, wir Künstler teilen alle ein wenig das Schicksal jener präparierten päpstlichen Sänger . . ." (8:296). (Is the artist a man at all? Ask a woman about that! I think we artists share a bit of the fate of those castrated Papal singers . . .). Note that here again Mann poses the problem in terms of gender ambivalence. Like Andromache, the castrato exemplifies the split identity of the artist as specifically sexual.

We see Krull's identification with such ambiguity throughout his life. The many costumes of his childhood suggest an early cleft between the man and his masks. What Heller calls his "hermetic ambivalencies" recall the constant transformations of both the patron-deity of Krull, Hermes-Aphrodite, and the element named for it, mercury (294). Felix finds the first earthly parallel for this pair in a brother and sister who mysteriously fascinate him from a hotel balcony in Frankfurt. These two look exotic—Spanish or South American perhaps. A foreign origin often marks specially significant, even fateful and symbolic figures in Mann. Think of that enigmatic traveler ("not a Bavarian type") whom Aschenbach sees before leaving Munich. This foreigner prefigures, almost as portentously as Aschenbach's dream of a rank jungle, his irresistible trip to Venice and death. As for the Frankfurt pair, Krull sees them elevated high above him, thus godlike; they anticipate the divine Andromache. Krull finds this couple just as spellbinding as he does the aerialist. And again the vision of duality prompts thoughts of love.

Liebesträume, Träume des Entzückens und des Vereinigungstrebens—ich kann sie nicht anders nennen, obgleich

sie keiner Einzelgestalt, sondern einem Doppelwesen glichen, einem flüchtig-innig erblickten Geschwisterpaar ungleichen Geschlechts—meines eigenen und des anderen, also des schönen. Aber die Schönheit lag hier im Doppelten, in der lieblichen Zweiheit, . . . Liebesträume, die ich liebte, eben weil sie von . . . *ursprünglicher Ungetrenntheit und Unbestimmtheit*, doppelten und das heißt doch erst: ganzen Sinnes waren, das berückend Menschliche in beiderlei Geschlechtsgestalt selig umfassten. (*GW* 7:346, italics mine)

Dreams of love, dreams of delight and a longing for union—I cannot name them otherwise, though they concerned not a single image but a double creature, a pair fleetingly but profoundly glimpsed, a brother and sister—a representative of my own sex and the other, the fair one. But the beauty here lay in the duality, the charming doubleness. . . . Dreams of love, dreams that I loved precisely because they were of . . . *primal indivisibility and indeterminacy*; which means that only then is there a significant whole blessedly embracing what is beguilingly human in both sexes. (Lindley 66)

This last phrase, “what is beguilingly human in both sexes,” recalls what Cocteau terms “the supernatural sex of beauty.” Moreover, the whole passage identifies another theme, closely linked to androgyny, that Cocteau also implies: incest. Mann probably adopted this motif of sibling incest from Greek and Roman mythology, which always hovers in the background of this book that ruthlessly parodies myth. As Delcourt and Busst show in detail, incest and androgyny have overlapped in ways that characterize many eras since antiquity. Indeed we may expand this thematic cluster to include narcissism. All three traits express aspects of the problem a culture has in accomodating two permanent features of human nature: oneness and duality.<sup>8</sup>

Both Cocteau and Mann treat incest repeatedly. Two of Cocteau’s major plays, both re-created as films, depend on sibling and parent-child couplings: *Les Enfants Terribles* and *Les Parents Terribles*. The lesser play *La Machine Infernale* gives his contemporary version of the Oedipal mother-son passion. Given Cocteau’s obsessive reworking of Greek myth, his modern versions of incest seem inevitable. Mann’s early story “Wälsungenblut” (The



Blood of the Walsungs) satirizes a Wagnerian sibling union supposedly inspired by the first of three brother-sister pairs in his own family. Remarkably enough, the Mann children appeared in this sequence: Erika 1905-Klaus 1906; Golo 1909-Monika 1910; Elisabeth 1918-Michael 1919.<sup>9</sup>

Krull himself exemplifies a sexuality constantly shifting between the one and the two. We get hints of the bisexual in his relations to Marquis Venosta and Lord Kilmarnock. Other dual beings appear in the confusing pair of Spanish women, Zaza and Zouzou. And a final sexual deception closes the book in the hilarious exchange of Frau Kuckuck for her daughter. Such dualities ultimately express what Charles Neider calls "the artist's intermediary position" (353). This critic interprets the ambivalence in Mann more narrowly than I do: he sees here a specifically Freudian clue to identity. "All that Mann has written about the artist. . . . disguises a basically sexual motif: the ambivalence between masculine and feminine traits in the artist . . . more expressly stated, the artist's ambivalence between his mother and his father" (353).<sup>10</sup>

In any case, we may see the many double images that fascinate Mann as a sign of his own striving for unity. Here lies perhaps the only theme seriously proposed in this novel, the theory of underlying universal oneness in nature that Professor Kuckuck espouses. "The artist does many things, but universality is his need and unity his obsession. Such is the oneness ironically concealed behind the narrative disunity of the picaresque, the acquisitive and amatory episodes of the mobile rogue; . . ." (Heilman 151). Since the eighteenth century at least, German writers have been expressing the urge toward *Ganzheit*, oneness. Peter Gay pursues the theme as crucial for the twentieth century in the chapter "The Hunger for Wholeness" in *Weimar Culture* (1968).

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the prime difference between our two texts concerns narrative voice. Cocteau writes in the first person as a critic, author and homosexual. He clearly identifies with his admired subject. Mann, however, writes in the persona of Krull as artist of illusion. Hence the involvement of the author seems deftly mediated by his narrator, who hardly resembles Mann at all. The author himself does not identify with the adored Andromache. Yet recently, since three



volumes of his diaries began to appear in 1977, Mann scholars have seriously discussed his own homosexuality.

Feuerlicht gives an exhaustive account of letter and diary references to the major male objects of desire for Mann, Paul Ehrenberg and Klaus Heuser. Ehrenberg, a successful painter and womanizer who attracted the unmarried Mann, probably served as model for Rudi Schwerdtfeger in *Doktor Faustus*; the experience with Heuser dates from summer vacations on Sylt in 1927 and 1928. The diary entries force us to challenge our received image of Mann as solidly conventional. Most surprisingly, he claims more "normality" in his attachments to the two men than in his long, ostensibly happy marriage (*Tagebücher* 412). One wonders how to square this thought with the simplistic attack on homoerotic love in "Über die Ehe" (1925).<sup>11</sup>

This essay now reads as one of Mann's intellectually weakest, exemplifying the perils of his rigorously dialectical thinking. "Deutlich wie nirgends zeigt sich . . . , wie Tugend und Sittlichkeit Sache des Lebens sind, nichts anderes als ein kategorischer Imperativ, der Lebensbefehl—während aller Aesthetismus pessimistisch-orgiastischer Natur, dass heisst, des Todes ist. Dass alles Künstlertum dazu neigt, zum Abgrunde tendiert, ist nur allzu gewiss" (*GWX*, 199). ("More clearly than anywhere else, we see that virtue and morality are the stuff of life, nothing other than a categorical imperative, the command to live—while all aestheticism is of a pessimistic-orgiastic nature, in short: the stuff of death. That all artistry is susceptible to such an abyss is all too certain"). This last sentence is a virtual self-quotation from *Tod in Venedig* of fourteen years earlier. Seeing in love between men only a narcissistic death-wish, Mann ignores the extraordinary talent and perceptiveness of most homosexual artists, who give society just what it needs: critique, protest, revolt. Think of his own son Klaus! In personal terms, this essay verges repulsively on self-congratulation. Comparing it with the presumably more honest diary entry of nine years later, we see Mann as confused at best, hypocritical at worst.

Writing on this study, Feuerlicht confirms my suspicion that Mann too identifies, albeit subliminally, with his airborne androgyne. Moreover, this mannish woman thus subtly expresses some of the same erotic aesthetics that the complementary woman-like man, Barbette, does openly for Cocteau. Here lies the major link between these two pieces. Barbette blatantly manipulates the illusion of having

two sexes; Andromache merely appears boyish. Yet both figures tell us something similar. They both show that the artist must dwell in fantasy; he always wears a mask. How can he better subvert and transcend his own identity than by changing sex? In becoming his own opposite, the modern artist attains Baudelaire's great ideal of simultaneity, the art of being both inside and outside oneself: "être hors de chez soi" (Pichois *OC* 2:692).

The circus offers the perfect home for the androgyne, that creature who lives between two sexes. Again, we note, the popular show represents a *Zwischenreich*. Firmly tied to the ordinary world in its earthy realism, the vulgar spectacle suggests yet another, exotic realm. Furthermore, the vagrant life of "fahrende Leute," wanderers, connotes the "between-ness" of indeterminacy. Krull places the angelic Andromache closer to heaven than earth, so his circus tent also has divine dimensions. Here too we see a similarity to Cocteau: his circus world forms a crucial part of the myth of redemption through art that pervades his work.<sup>12</sup> In the phrase "the supernatural sex of beauty" we sense his transcendent vision of the artist. One recalls the relation of Zarathustra to the rope-dancer, who falls and dies but survives spiritually in the doctrine that Zarathustra preaches. In a comparable way, the art of Barbette, surpassing his given gender, exemplifies the redemptive art that Cocteau proposes.<sup>12</sup>

For both Cocteau and Mann, such duality as that of the androgyne lies at the root of art. Cocteau says:

L'art naît du coït entre l'élément mâle et l'élément femelle qui nous composent tous, plus équilibrés chez l'artiste que chez les autres hommes. Il résulte d'une sorte d'inceste, d'amour de soi avec soi, de parthénogenèse. C'est ce qui rend le mariage si dangereux chez les artistes, pour lesquels il représente un pléonasme, un effort de monstre vers la norme. (*Opium* 110-11)

Art is born of the coitus between the masculine and the feminine element of which we are all composed, in finer balance in the artist than in others. It results from a sort of incest, a love of self for self, a parthenogenesis. This is what makes marriage so dangerous for artists, for whom it represents a pleonasm, a monster's attempt to approach the norm.

Ultimately, however, our two authors differ sharply on the aesthetics of effect. For Krull, reception constitutes about three-

fourths of the success of art. In fact, his crucial identification with all performers depends on his own effectiveness with an audience. Hence, he feels superior to the rest of the spectators. "Sie genossen nur, und Genuss ist ein leidender Zustand, in welchem niemand sich genügt, der sich zum Tätigen, zum Selber-Ausüben, geboren fühlt" (7:463–64). ("They merely enjoyed, and enjoyment is a passive condition, which does not suffice for someone who feels born for active achievement" (Lindley 161).

Like Andromache and her troupe, Krull knows how to manipulate an audience; he too creates an illusion in order to gain approval. He sees himself as part of their profession, "part of the general vocation of producing effects, of gratifying and enchanting an audience" (161). (" . . . vom Fach der Wirkung, der Menschenbeglückung und -bezauberung" (463). Here Krull invokes just that *Wirkungsästhetik* that Mann deplored as the worst feature of art itself. The trickster exemplifies the amoral artist, the center of Mann's Platonic view of art as corrupt by nature. In Krull, of course, he adopts a gaily ironic tone toward his con-man artist, for Mann parodies the whole genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Specifically, Felix burlesques the idealistic hero of Goethe's autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

For Cocteau, as we have seen, the greatest art is three-fourths artifice. He considers playing the opposite sex a marvel: the Baudelairean liberation that comes from cheating nature. With his penchant for paradox, this poet believes that art must go against the grain. Fowlie claims that the aesthetics of Cocteau emerged from one crucial lesson of the two greatest masters of the twentieth century, Picasso and Stravinsky. Namely, "art must insult the habits of art" (37). I find Cocteau's ideals already quite developed when he met these two (Picasso in 1915, Stravinsky in 1910), but of course they exerted a potent influence.

In any case, the idea of art as a constant rebellion against the world as given contradicts the aesthetics of Mann. It relates well to the attitude of Klaus Mann, who often acknowledged the influence of Cocteau as a counter-weight to his father (see note 9). For him, who condemns the Platenesque craving for beauty—read death—art borders on immorality when it rejects prevailing social norms. The conclusions of these two writers could hardly differ more: "Art is illusion, hence morally suspect," versus "Hurray for the lies of art!" Yet they both believe the artist must transcend convention; both show his nature as an androgynous expression of difference.

## NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

1. Indeed we may see this pair as the two poles of the show itself: the adept versus the inept. Or, in larger metaphoric terms: heroic aspiration versus comic failure. The spectator enjoys a deep catharsis in watching these evocations of the two mythic extremes of the human condition. Fellini depicts just this rhythmic alternation of awe and ridicule in *The Clowns*, whose first part re-creates circus shows he saw as a boy.

2. The letter from Thomas Mann of 8 October 1947 expresses his lasting respect for Cocteau, whose *La Machine Infernale* he planned to translate. (Mann *Briefe 1937–47*, 552–53.) Also, for Cocteau's generous praise of Mann, see Mann, *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, 441. Elsewhere Mann speaks of his work on "Die vertauschten Köpfe" as an "erstmalige Annäherung an die französisch-surrealistische Sphäre (Cocteau), zu der ich mich längst hingezogen fühlte," "a first approach to the French-surrealist sphere of Cocteau, which has attracted me for a long time" (Kroll 158).

3. The admiration of many Romantics for ballet dancers depends on the same metaphor of superiority, in both literal and figurative senses. In their marvelous defiance of gravity, dancers engage our wish for weightlessness. Athletes can do the same thing, though sports lack the aesthetic aspect of dance. The athlete, relying solely on physical mastery, still belongs to the world of technique, while the dancer uses technique only as a means to the end of interpretation or abstract design.

4. Apart from androgyny, psychoanalysts of the circus have a field day with aerialists, who suggest a wealth of erotic play. (See Tarachow, Storey.) Even without the Freudian notion of sexual soaring, any spectator can readily fantasize the aerial act, with its entwined limbs, its ropes, wires and trapezes. What the nineteenth-century idealistic artist saw as a heroic mastery of space, of human fate itself, later became a particularly free erotic dance. Consider the sexual acrobatics of the circus artistes in Beckmann, or the tumbler-lovers closing Rilke's fifth *Duino Elegy* (1922), with their "Türme aus Lust," towers of joy.

5. The title of one of Cocteau's books, *La Difficulté d'être* (*The Difficulty of Being*) reflects the fragility of his own sense of identity. The phrase comes from the aged Fontenelle, who told his doctor he felt well, except for "une certaine difficulté d'être." Cocteau added that Fontenelle felt that way only at the end, while he had the problem all his life (Fowlie 138).

6. Cocteau uses this telling phrase repeatedly in his autobiographical works. It first characterizes the touchstone appeal of his boyhood love, Dargelos, captured on film in *Les Enfants Terribles* (1950).

7. We find a germ for the Barbette essay in a poem Cocteau wrote in 1920, after

seeing an illusionistic female aerialist. “. . . Aerogyne!/ Elle ment avec son corps/ Mieux que l'esprit n'imagine/ Les mensonges du décor . . .” (Aerogyne! The lies she tells with her body/ Thwart the mind's attempts to see through/ The lies of the décor . . .) (quoted in Steegmuller 327).

8. The sense of our dual nature lies deep in the subconscious, according to Jung and other theorists. Even pop psychology now tells us that “normal” people bear various amounts of the feminine and the masculine. Hence the acceptance of rebellion when traditional sex roles prove unsatisfactory. Men become feminized, women turn mannish. We will probably never escape such division, which goes back to the ancient definition of man as matter and woman as spirit. Böhme, Zinzendorf, Ballanche and Swedenborg developed powerful theologies from such notions. Probably the most familiar poetic version of the narcissist union with self appears in Novalis. And even the relatively “modern” Péladan claimed in *La Science de l'Amour* (1911) that there is a third sex: people whose souls have a different gender than their bodies (Busst 57). Cf. also James Walter Jones, *The Third Sex in German Literature from the Turn of the Century to 1933*, Wisconsin dissertation 1986.

9. The incest theme connects Cocteau and Mann directly, since Mann wanted to translate the Oedipal *La Machine Infernale* for the Zürich Schauspielhaus. (See note 2 above.) A more intriguing link in this regard concerns the close relation between Cocteau and Mann's son Klaus. The profound admiration that this exiled journalist felt for Cocteau went well beyond their obvious kinship in homoerotic aestheticism and the reliance on drugs. Klaus Mann adapted Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles* (1929) as *Geschwister* (1930), stressing the incestuous bond at the center of the novel. Klaus Mann found personal resonances in the brother-sister pair of Cocteau that recall his own close tie to his androgynous sister Erika. Kroll calls Mann's play “ein hohes Lied seiner Liebe zu [Erika],” “a song of Solomon of his love for her” (3, 98).

10. Exner, specifically shunning the diaries in favor of textual examples, expands the repertoire of sexually ambivalent characters beyond the familiar homoerotic and bisexual types in *Tonio Kröger*, *Der Tod in Venedig*, *Der Zauberberg*, and *Doktor Faustus*. Joseph, for instance, he calls the prime symbol of androgynous harmony; Krull is “pansexual” (274, 262). While welcoming Exner's broadening of our thematic category, I cannot agree that Mann's androgynous figures represent wholeness and perfection. Like Andromache, they fascinate us precisely as dual beings: both male and female. So they never achieve the integrity that Mann imposed on his own public life only by suppressing his homoerotic side. Hence these androgynes appear problematic indeed.

11. Green has written a long and intriguing book on the enacting of this myth among the English “dandy-aesthetes” of this century. Such “Sonnenkinder” (a term borrowed from Bachofen)—Harold Acton, Brian Howard, Evelyn Waugh, Auden, the Sitwells—sought the salvation of pure style in defying the prevailing culture of industry,

finance and war. Naturally, for most of Green's examples, the escape from patriarchal evil had to be homosexual. Many "Sonnenkinder" also sought redemption in Marxism or the Catholic Church. Cf. Klaus Mann, who tried Marxism in the thirties, and Cocteau, who "converted" to pious Catholicism in 1925.

12. Here again Cocteau relates well to Nietzsche, though I know of only one critic who makes this link. Crowson believes that Cocteau became just "the poet of life" that Nietzsche called for in the Superman (173). Not only does Nietzsche also idealize art as the only salvation available to man: both writers also assume the irrational basis of art. Both their writing styles depend of contradiction and paradox. Moreover, they both regard dance as the supreme form of creativity. Nietzsche reacted against the dry abstractions typical of the Germanic mind, proclaiming knowledge as joyful in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. Dance expresses such joy in much of his imagery, from *Zarathustra* to *Götzendämmerung*. Cocteau found in the ballet his optimal form of multi-faceted creativity.

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